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Improving reflective writing in higher education: A social semiotic perspective

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Abstract

Reflective skills are widely regarded as a means of improving students' lifelong learning and professional practice in higher education (Rogers 2001). While the value of reflective practice is widely accepted in educational circles, a critical issue is that reflective writing is complex, and has high rhetorical demands, making it difficult to master unless it is taught in an explicit and systematic way. This paper argues that a functional-semantic approach to language (Eggins 2004), based on Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics can be used to develop a shared language to explicitly teach and assess reflective writing in higher education courses. The paper outlines key theories and scales of reflection, and then uses systemic functional linguistics to develop a social semiotic model for reflective writing. Examples of reflective writing are analysed to show how such a model can be used explicitly to improve the reflective writing skills of higher education students.

Introduction

Reflective skills are widely regarded as a means of improving students' lifelong learning and professional practice in higher education (Rogers 2001), particularly, but not exclusively, in courses that include work-integrated learning (WIL). While the value of reflective practice is widely accepted in educational circles, a critical issue is that reflection is a 'complex, rigorous, intellectual, and emotional enterprise that takes time to do well' (Rodgers 2002, p.845). Thus far, there is a lack of clarity in the terminology and definition of reflection, its antecedent conditions, its processes, teaching strategies and outcomes (see Moon 2006; Procee 2006; Rogers 2001; Russell 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that reflective writing by higher education cohorts tends to be superficial unless it is approached in a consistent and systematic way (Orland-Barak 2005). Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Nestor (2002) argue that deep reflective skills *can* be taught, however they require development and practice over time. Further, Reidsema's (2009) research shows explicitly that 'good' or

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critical reflective writing is linguistically richer in description and explanation than ‘poor’ reflective writing.

Projects reported in the literature, which relate to improving reflective writing for higher education students, tend not to include the identification and teaching of key textual features or linguistic resources of academic reflection (see Reidsema, 2009 for an example of identification). The meta-awareness of both teaching staff and students of the textual structures, grammars and vocabulary of academic reflection as a genre are integral to the effective teaching and assessment of such writing.

This paper argues that a functional-semantic approach to language (Eggins 2004), based on Halliday’s (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) can be used to develop a shared language to explicitly teach and assess reflective writing in higher education courses. First, I outline theories and scales of reflection. Secondly, I use SFL to develop a social semiotic model for reflective writing, and finally, I show how such a model can be used explicitly to improve the reflective writing skills of higher education students.

Academic reflection

Reflection, or reflective practice, has a long tradition and stems from philosophy, particularly the work of Dewey (1933) on reflective thinking for personal and intellectual growth. Dewey’s approach is considered to be psychological, and is concerned with the nature of reflection and how it occurs. A more critical and transformative approach to reflection, which is rooted in critical social theory, is evident in the work of Friere (1972), Habermas (1974) and others who have followed their lead (see for example Hatton and Smith 1995; Mezirow 1990). Critical, transformative reflection is underpinned by a commitment to social change by reading the world critically and imagining a better world that is less oppressive (Leonardo 2004). Such ideals may not always apply to the types and purposes of

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reflection in higher education and the professions, however such an approach suggests that an alternative reality can be recast in which the student or professional can take an intellectual stance in dealing with critical issues and practices, and is empowered to initiate change (Giroux 1988).

Schon's (1983) work on the 'reflective practitioner' has also influenced many scholars interested in the work of professionals and how 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' can influence their professional education. Schon's approach is steeped in practice, particularly in building theory from practice. His ideas about improving practice through reflectivity and theory-in-use have inspired much debate around the role of espoused theory and theory-in-use. Schon favours theory that is built from everyday practice, however this view has been criticized for not moving beyond the immediate situation and for potentially perpetuating hegemonic or normalising forms of practice rather than enacting change at a broader level (Gur-Ze'ev 2001).

Such diverse theoretical underpinnings mean that reflection is multi-faceted and can be interpreted in various ways (Moon 1999; Fund, Court, and Kramarski 2002). Most researchers and commentators agree though, that there are different types or hierarchical levels of reflection. Grossman (2008) suggests that there are at least four different levels of reflection along a depth continuum. These range from descriptive accounts, to different levels of mental processing, to transformative or intensive reflection. He argues that tasks can be scaffolded for students at each level to produce more productive reflections. Similarly, Bain et al. (2002) suggest different levels of reflection with their 5Rs framework of Reporting, Responding, Relating, Reasoning and Reconstructing. Their levels increase in complexity and move from description of, and personal response to, an issue or situation; to the use of theory and experience to explain, interrogate, and ultimately transform practice. They suggest that the content or level of reflection should be determined by the problems and dilemmas of

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the practitioner. Hatton and Smith (1995) also posit a depth model which moves from description to dialogic (stepping back to evaluate) and finally to critical reflection.

Academic reflection, as opposed to personal reflection, generally involves a conscious and stated purpose (Moon 2006), and needs to show evidence of learning. This type of purposeful reflection, which is generally the aim in higher education courses, and is the focus of this paper, must ultimately reach the critical level for deep, active learning to occur. Such reflection is underpinned by a transformative approach to learning that sees the pedagogical process as one of knowledge transformation rather than knowledge transmission (Leonardo 2004; Kalantzis and Cope 2008). The learner is an active participant in improving learning and professional practice. Critical social theory underpins this transformative approach to reflection. Critical social theory is concerned with emancipation, however it also engages in a language of transcendence, whereby critique serves to cultivate students' abilities to question, deconstruct and reconstruct their own practices and imagine an alternative reality (Giroux 1988; Kincheloe 2003). When students are provided with opportunities to examine and reflect upon their beliefs, philosophies and practices, and deconstruct prevailing ideologies, they are more likely to see themselves as active change agents and lifelong learners within their professions (Mezirow 2006). Ovens and Tinning (2009) argue, however, that the discursive context of the reflection will influence the types of reflections that students produce. They suggest that in the professional context (their example is the practicum in schools); students often encounter managerial and power-control discourses, which can override university learning, and thus shape the kinds of reflections that are written in assignment work about those WIL contexts.

This paper suggests that if students are explicitly taught key structural elements and linguistic realisations of an academic reflection using a social semiotic approach, they will be

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more likely to be able to reflect critically on the professional or learning context, and to reconstruct their thinking around prevailing discourses and practices (Carrington & Selva 2010). They will achieve this by acknowledging the contextual factors and using theory from their courses to describe, explain and discuss key incidents and their implications for future practice. Critical/transformational reflective writing as a form of academic writing is difficult for students to master (Rodgers 2002). It is not intuitive, and it requires more than descriptions of events and feelings, which are features of personal reflections that students may have experienced through diary or journal writing at school and in their life-worlds. Hence, these more complex purposes, high rhetorical demands (Goodfellow and Lea 2005), and linguistically demanding features of the genre, require explicit teaching and scaffolded development over time (Bain 2002) for students to achieve success.

Towards a shared language: Social semiotics and the reflective writing structure

Language, according to Halliday (1978), is one of the semiotic systems that constitute a culture. He suggests that language is a shared meaning potential which is inherently social, and, in fact, language as a sign system ‘actively symbolizes’ the social system (p.3). From this perspective, that of language as a social semiotic, the exchange of meanings is dependent upon the social context and the purpose of the exchange. SFL (Eggins 2004; Halliday 1978; Halliday and Hasan 1985) is an approach to language that is interested in what people *do* with language, and how language is *structured* as a text for particular uses.

When considering the social context of texts (discourse), Halliday and Hasan (1985) indicate three features that determine how the language is structured. These features are *field* of discourse, *tenor* of discourse and *mode* of discourse. Field refers to what is happening or what the text is about. Tenor refers to who is taking part and their roles and relationships in

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the text and context. Mode refers to what part the language is playing in the text, including its functions, for example, persuasion, exposition, description. Each of these features contributes to how language is structured to make meaning in a text.

These features of discourse are expressed through particular meaning functions in a text. The *field* is expressed through *ideational* meanings. The *ideational* function includes the use of vocabulary and the transitivity structures in the grammar (Halliday and Hasan 1985). The structure of a clause in particular, which indicates (at the basic level) who or what is involved (participants); what they are doing (processes); how they are described (attributes); and the manner in which they do things (circumstances), is integral to how meaning is ascribed to texts. The *tenor* is expressed through *interpersonal* meanings. The *interpersonal* function expresses the writer's role relationship with the reader, and the writer's attitude towards the subject matter, including negotiation and appraisal (Martin 2004). This function is realised through pronouns to indicate first, second or third person voice; through the mood – questioning, judging, appraising, commanding or stating; and through the modality or degree of probability that is offered by the writer. Finally, the *mode* is expressed through *textual* meanings. The *textual* function is realised through the way the text is organised – what is fore-grounded and what cohesive connections are made throughout the text (Eggins 2004). All of these functions are interwoven through any text, and each contributes to the socially constructed meanings that are made from the text.

The development of discourse competence is integral to an individual's overall communicative competence and particularly important for learners who need to develop skills in academic forms of writing (Bruce 2008). Understanding that different social purposes and contexts require different forms of writing is the first step in developing a shared language to teach academic genres to students. Once we identify the organisational structure that is suitable for the purpose, audience and mode, we can begin to teach students

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to choose appropriate structures for the task at hand. Finally, we can drill down to the most appropriate language choices to make within that structure, for this particular context. The focus of a social semiotic approach is not so much on teaching basic units of language such as grammar and vocabulary, but rather on making appropriate *choices* of grammar and vocabulary and so on to suit the contextual factors of each task.

One of the contextual factors in writing in higher education is the discipline in which the writing is being undertaken. Knowledge is structured in specific ways for different disciplines (Martin 2007), which is realised through the *ideational* meanings of texts. Understanding and using the technical vocabulary of the discipline, and relating these to the purpose and audience of the writing task at hand, are important factors in discourse competence. Academic rigour is maintained in written tasks through the choice of ideational meanings that are appropriately expressed through interpersonal and textual functions. Students who master the knowledge structure of the discipline, along with the expressive resources to represent meanings, are much more likely to be successful in higher education than those who master one or the other. This seems like an obvious statement, however it highlights a key issue identified in this paper, that the expressive resources tend only to be *assessed* rather than taught.

Genre-based approaches to text, which consider both the social purpose and the structures and linguistic resources used to achieve this purpose, are useful for teaching academic forms of writing. Academic writing is generally high-stakes, that is, it is assessed as evidence of the achievement of learning outcomes (content and process) of a course of work. Thus, it is important to provide students with the resources they need to write successfully in the academic context. Bruce (2008) provides an outline of various ways that genre-based approaches to writing have been defined and used, including different definitions of genres, text types, text genres, cognitive genres and so on. He argues that ‘social genres’ refer to

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socially recognisable structures, which include texts in terms of their overall social purpose, for example, academic articles, personal letters and film reviews. He then goes on to suggest that ‘cognitive genres’ or ‘text types’ sit within these social genres, and are categorised according to their rhetorical purpose, for example description, recount, explanation. Bruce’s (2008) approach is a useful means of categorisation, not necessarily because of the terms he uses, but rather because he argues that any social genre may potentially incorporate a number of cognitive genres or text types to achieve its social purpose. Academic reflection is one such social genre.

A structure for reflective writing in higher education

The social purpose of academic reflection is to transform practice in some way, whether it is the practice of learning or the practice of the discipline or the profession. To achieve this purpose, academic reflection hybridises a number of text types, and more specifically, the text types of recount, description, explanation and discussion. **Table 1** below outlines the features of each of these text types as they pertain to academic reflection.

Insert Table 1 Text types in an academic reflection

Social genres achieve their purpose through a recognizable or conventionalized structure, through text types and through linguistic realisations of these forms of writing. Academic reflection uses specific kinds of linguistic resources to achieve its high rhetorical demands and complex purposes. For example, it uses first person voice (I) with thinking and sensing processes (verbs/verbal groups), as does any form of reflection, yet it also requires the use of nominalisation (verb turned into noun) and technical participants (nouns/noun groups) of the discipline to allow dense and abstract concepts to be efficiently stated and compared. It also demands the use of evidentiary adjectival (descriptive attributes) and causal

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adverbial (circumstantial) groups to show reasoning and explanation (Coffin 2006). Through my own reflective practice in teaching in pre-service teacher education courses, I have developed a model that encapsulates the scales of reflection evident in the literature (see Bain et al, 2002 and others), but which takes this a step further to conceptualise the linguistic conventions which can achieve these scales. The model is applicable to any discipline as it accounts for linguistic choices that signify the subject matter and context. **Table 2** outlines my model of a conventional structure and the linguistic resources of academic reflection.

Insert Table2 Academic Reflective Writing Model – Structure and linguistic resources here

Using the model to improve writing in higher education

This section will show how the Academic Reflective Writing Model can be used with students to improve their academic reflections. I use a sample reflection from an education faculty, where students were expected to write a reflective piece, including evidence, about classroom management while on their field experience (practicum) in a local elementary school. They were also required to discuss their demonstration of state-mandated professional standards. These students had access to examples of reflective writing, but were not exposed to this model, and were not explicitly taught the structure or linguistic features of a reflection. A good strategy for assessment of a piece of writing is to analyse and annotate the writing according to the conventional structure and linguistic features. This strategy is also a powerful self-assessment technique that students can be taught to use on their own writing.

Insert Figure 1 Analysis of writing excerpt 1

Insert Figure 2 Analysis of writing excerpt 2

Insert Figure 3 Analysis of writing excerpt 3

Insert *Figure 4 Analysis of writing excerpt 4*

This writing example has a number of features which are recognisable as an academic reflection, including the use of technical education ‘jargon’, the use of evidence to support statements, and some causal indicators. There are elements of the key text types of an academic reflection, including:

- *Recount* – often too much recounting of the broader experience;
- *Description* of classroom management practices, but needs more description of a critical incident;
- *Explanation* – some reasoning about the strategies in place, but not about a critical incident or how socio-cultural contexts or groups may have influenced the classroom management;
- *Discussion* about the value of particular activities or strategies, but no specific future implications or plans.

This student would benefit from some clear guidelines about the structure and linguistic realisations of an academic reflection in order not only to improve their writing skills for this assessment piece, but also to move their reflections to a more critical and transformative level.

Discussion

Academic reflection is a complex form of writing, which involves four different cognitive genres (text types) and has a clear (often high-stakes) purpose of demonstrating learning. The discursive context is a factor in the kinds of reflections that are produced (Ovens and Tinning 2009), such that the requirements of different disciplines, and different professional and learning contexts will influence what is required, and indeed, what is

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produced. Providing a shared language and a recognisable social semiotic model for academic reflection is a useful scaffold to assist students to demonstrate discourse competence (Bruce 2008). They can be guided to apply the contextual requirements, while also choosing appropriate expressive resources for a reflective assignment task. The model I have proposed is a flexible framework that allows discipline-specific and context-specific knowledge to be demonstrated, but also provides clear guidance on the textual features that can be used to competently express such knowledge.

A way in which this approach can be enacted as a teaching strategy is proposed below, whereby students can be guided through the process with explicit questions. The model is used as a reference to identify key linguistic features, first in exemplar texts, and ultimately in students' own written texts. Identification of the purpose and context of an exemplary reflective text is a necessary starting point in a social semiotic approach. Key questions are used to highlight the textual structure, for example:

1. What does the first paragraph do? (*Identifies an issue and why it's important; may use theory to explain relevance; outlines key themes that this piece of writing will address – **reporting and responding***)
2. What do subsequent paragraphs do? (*Each paragraph introduces a new theme and provides evidence from practice or current literature/theory to explain this theme; introduces multiple perspectives; considers the ethics involved – **relating and reasoning***)
3. What does the final paragraph do? (*Re-states the issue; re-iterates key points; suggests new possibilities for the future; may explore change that could benefit others - **reconstructing***)

Probing questions can be used to identify how the language in the text achieves the purpose, for example:

1. How does the writer indicate that they are reporting on, and responding to, something that they were involved in or observed? (*use of personal pronoun 'I'; use of thinking and sensing verbs*)
2. How does the writer indicate how the incident played out? (*use of temporal language eg first, then, afterwards*)
3. How does the writer show their knowledge of the discipline/subject matter? (*use of technical or subject specific nouns and noun groups – naming words*)
4. How does the writer relate this incident to other similar incidents or personal experience? (*use of comparison/contrast language; draws on practical egs*)
5. How does the writer reason and explain why it happened the way it did? (*use of causal language; adverbs and adverbial groups to explain when, where or how things happened; references to literature and practice as evidence*)
6. How does the writer make judgements about things they observed? (*use of particular kinds of adjectives or describing words to describe the people or the task or the setting*)
7. How does the writer use succinct language to get their ideas across? (*use of nominalisation – turn verb into noun to say more with less words*)
8. How does the writer show that they are thinking to the future and how they will reconstruct and apply their new knowledge? (*use of future tense; adverbial groups to describe conditions under which something could be done*)

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The textual features can be annotated on the exemplar (highlight, draw arrows etc) to show students where they appear in the text. Students can apply their knowledge by identifying the structure and language features in another exemplar or a peer's work – always relating back to the purpose, subject matter and audience of the reflection. The crucial step is to go to the students' own reflective pieces and ask them to annotate their work according to the model, and to determine what they can improve. Self-assessment and reflection on the linguistic intricacies of one's writing is an effective way to improve writing knowledge and skills (Christie & Dreyfus 2007).

Conclusion

Providing students with examples of reflective writing will not necessarily aid their own attempts to write reflectively. Teaching students how to identify, compare and contrast the features of evaluative or critical reflection with the features of lower level descriptive reflection or recounting is essential when university teachers use exemplars to model effective writing practice. Through such explicit demonstration and by giving students the opportunity to annotate these key features on exemplars, and subsequently on their own writing, they are supported as active participants in the learning process. Such explicit scaffolding is particularly useful for first year students who are new to academic genres, and international students who often need to learn the nuances of English language use to move from passive learning styles to more active critical reflective tasks (Singh and Doherty 2008).

Reflective writing as a form of assessment has become increasingly popular in university courses (Grossman 2008), particularly as a way for students to relate disciplinary ways of working and knowing (Freebody & Muspratt 2007) to their own values, ethics and practices. Students are often penalised in assessment for an inability to express their

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knowledge and understanding in discipline-appropriate ways, yet teaching time is not necessarily allocated to the development of this crucial element of assessment. Generalised library programs cannot always offer the specificity needed to attend to these disciplinary demands. If a model such as the one I have proposed is introduced in a systematic way across courses or programs, students will have multiple opportunities to become familiar with the complex textual demands of academic reflection, and thus improve their skills in this area. Students and academic staff will have access to a shared language about academic reflection that can be applied in different contexts and at different stages of learning. Supporting students in this way across courses can lead to more successful demonstrations of learning, as students are not hampered by a lack of expressive resources.

This approach to reflective writing is not without its complexities. Large classes and time constraints are real issues in the massification of higher education (Marendet & Wainwright 2009). A social semiotic approach prioritises the specifics of subject matter, audience and purpose, which means that the requirements of specific disciplines and tasks need to be addressed in individual units. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that providing students with de-contextualised resources will improve their writing skills. In fact, successful writing requires sustained scaffolding and most improvement occurs when students are taught to identify linguistic features in their own writing (Christie & Dreyfus 2007). Despite the constraints of contemporary university courses, real improvement in reflective writing skills can only be achieved if some priority is given to the development of these skills in university classes. If these skills are introduced in the first year of courses, and built upon in subsequent years using the shared language I propose, the necessity of devoting class time to these skills will diminish over the duration of the degree. Building solid foundations and taking a systematic approach to teaching and assessing reflective writing are crucial for widespread improvement in this area.

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Table 1 Text types in an academic reflection

| Text type | Elements evident in academic reflection |
|------------------|--|
| Recount | An experience or event is re-told using temporal indicators, thoughts and initial reactions |
| Description | Technical vocabulary of the discipline is used to describe the event, compare/contrast to other similar events or experiences |
| Explanation | Evidence, appraisal resources and cause/effect indicators are used to reason and explain how and why the event happened the way it did |
| Discussion | Hypothesise about different possible responses, actions and future practices |

Table 2 Academic Reflective Writing Model: Structure and linguistic resources

| Text Structure | Linguistic resources |
|---|---|
| <p>(Bold text categories from Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002 – 5Rs framework)</p> <div data-bbox="129 495 710 808" style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <p><i>Macro-theme (key idea)</i></p> <p><i>Introduce</i> the issue and recount a critical incident; use relevant theory to explain why it is significant; <i>preview</i> key themes of this reflective piece</p> <p>Report and Respond</p> </div> <div data-bbox="129 972 727 1424" style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <p><i>Hyper-themes (supporting evidence)</i></p> <p>Use a new paragraph for each new idea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relate – to self and professional practice; to other similar incidents or experiences • Reason – use relevant theory to explain how and why the incident occurred; appraise what happened; and introduce multiple perspectives </div> <div data-bbox="129 1644 727 1861" style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px;"> <p><i>Reinforce macro-theme (sum-up & plan)</i></p> <p>Reconstruct – hypothesise about different possible responses/actions; reframe future practice and show new understandings</p> </div> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First person voice – use of ‘I’ • Thinking and sensing verbs eg I believe, I feel, I question, I understand, I consider • Nominalisation – turn verbs into nouns to say more with less words eg The <i>implementation</i> of explicit vocal routines... • Technical/dense nouns and noun groups eg use discipline and professional ‘jargon’ and abstract terms such as <i>pedagogy</i>, <i>potential</i>, <i>student-negotiated learning framework</i>, <i>preventative measures</i> • Language of comparison/contrast eg similarly, unlike, just as..., in contrast to..., • Causal reasoning and explanation – eg as a result of..., the consequences of..., due to..., therefore, because • Adjectival groups to appraise and show evidence eg The <i>well-disciplined and highly motivated</i> class was evidence of... • Adverbial groups to show reason eg <i>According to</i> Jones (2005)... • Temporal links eg <i>After</i> considering... • Future tense verbs to project future practice eg I intend to..., I will ensure..., • Adverbial groups to consider different impacts or possibilities eg <i>Under these conditions</i>... |

Figure 1 Analysis of writing excerpt 1

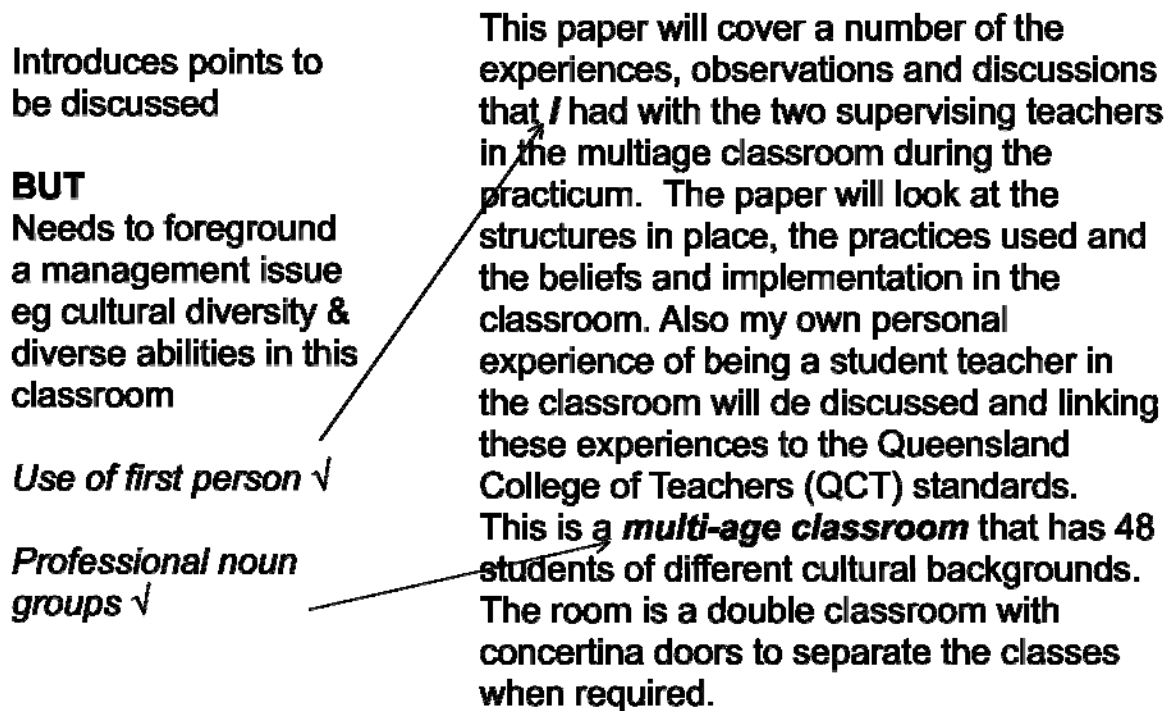


Figure 2 Analysis of writing excerpt 2

Figure 3 Analysis of writing excerpt 3

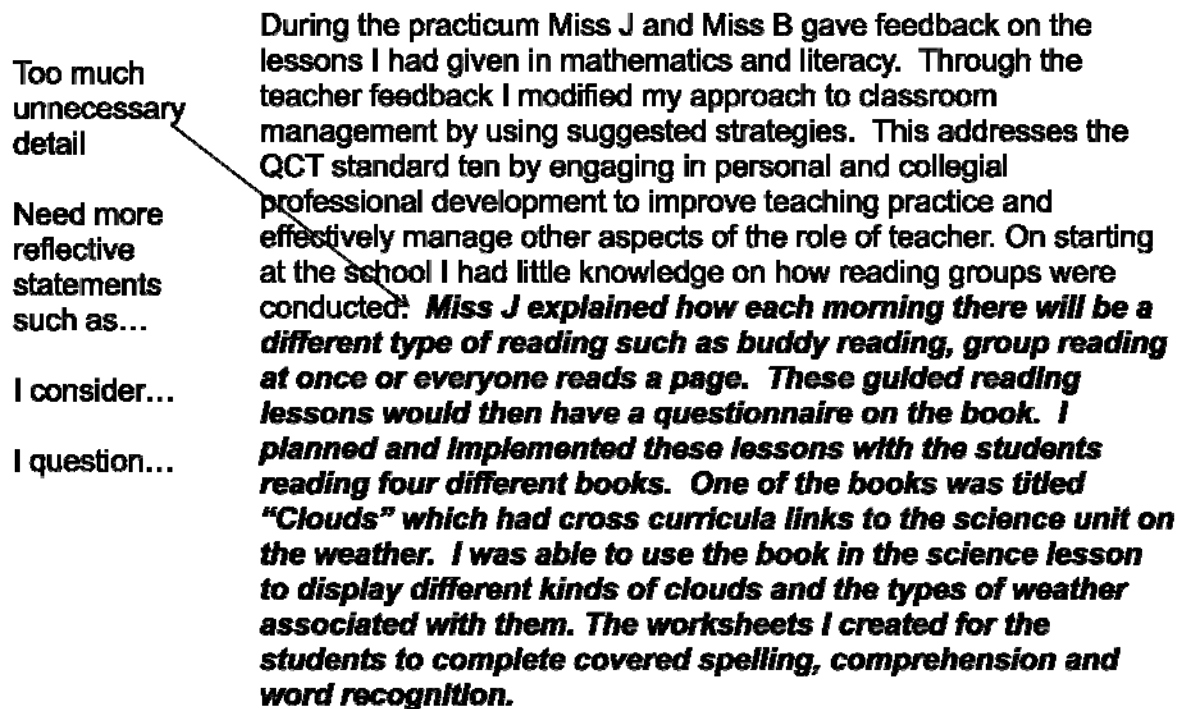


Figure 4 Analysis of writing excerpt 4

